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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [PTER](#) [ECON](#) [KCRM](#) [KPAL](#) [KWBG](#) [IS](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: EGYPT-GAZA BORDER OPERATIONS IMPACTING NORTH SINAI
POPULATION

Classified By: Minister Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs
William R. Stewart for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Key Points

-- The Government of Egypt (GOE) is using aggressive security measures to control the North Sinai population as a result of counter-smuggling operations at Egypt-Gaza border.

-- The local North Sinai population understands the national security concerns, but is getting frustrated with heavy-handed security procedures. There was a local protest against the more aggressive security measures, which resulted in the arrest of 55 people.

-- One North Sinai official expects smuggling operations to continue because smugglers are risk averse and have no other economic opportunities.

-- All local officials told us that the future of North Sinai is tied to a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace accord.

12. (S) Comment: We have been to North Sinai three times in the past two months. The GOE Security presence was more visible and aggressive this trip. We had a security "tail" during our entire trip. In addition, security officers forcibly entered our diplomatic vehicle during one of our meetings, and we were forced to evict them from the vehicle. We met with MP Fayez Abu Harb (protect) in a public restaurant because previous attempts to meet him in private attracted the attention of State Security (SSIS). We spoke for about 45 minutes. During the first thirty minutes he was very open and willing to discuss all topics, but then became distant after some other "patrons" entered the restaurant. Following their arrival he spoke only about his cement factory investments. End Comment.

Egypt Clamping Down on the Border

13. (C) During our visit to North Sinai from April 7-9, most of our contacts referred to the more aggressive security presence in the region as a result of on-going, counter-tunneling operations on the Egypt-Gaza border. Fayez Abu Harb (protect), a local Bedouin leader and the parliamentary representative for the areas of Shaykh Zowayed and Rafah, told us that Egyptian security forces are "clamping down at the border." He said the GOE was not allowing any new construction near the border areas and had destroyed existing construction considered to be "too close" to the border. Harb stated that the GOE strategy was to "completely control" the area. He said there is a checkpoint every 100 meters in Rafah and security forces are making numerous arrests.

Tensions Rising Due to Border Operations

¶4. (S) El Arish businessman Osama Kassas said that tensions between the populace and police were running high because of the heavy security presence. Harb told us that many people have complained to him about the oppressive security situation. He said that members of the local population staged a protest, near the border, during the previous week, to express their frustration with the measures that are in place. Harb said that Egyptian security forces arrested the five protest organizers and 50 of the participants. He said that many "misunderstandings" are occurring between Egyptian security and the local population. Harb told us that one family had their car stopped, and all their food and clothing confiscated because the security suspected they might be smuggling it to Gaza. Sameh Atta (protect), a member of the local Bedouin council, said that the population understood the national security danger posed by smuggling, but they also felt sympathy for those involved in smuggling because without the revenue they cannot support their families. MP Harb avoided answering questions on how long this situation could continue. However, he told us that he felt trapped between his responsibilities as a NDP member of parliament and a representative of the people.

Smuggling Operations Expected to Continue

¶5. (S) Bedouin council member Sameh Atta told us that Shaykh Zowayed and Rafah are home to young, ambitious men who have been raised in a dangerous environment. He said these men feel no risk aversion and will continue "working" to move their goods across the border. Atta said that if the GOE wants to halt smuggling operations, it needs either compensate the smugglers for the revenue that they will lose if their operations are halted, or provide good, sustainable job opportunities.

The Future of North Sinai Tied to a Middle East Peace

¶6. (C) Harb stated that the only solution to release the tensions in the region is a peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. He mentioned that most residents in Rafah and Shaykh Zowayed have family on the other side of the Gaza border, and they "feel" every event that happens there. Harb stated that a peace deal will also provide economic development and sustainable job opportunities for the region because of the potential for trade between North Sinai and Gaza.

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